

Appreciative Inquiry as Organizational Change in a Community Mental Health Setting

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational change that focuses on the strengths of an organization – discovering what is working well, and generating ideas within the organization for building on those strengths. AI has been applied in a variety of contexts including education, social work, health care, and academia. Little to no research, however, has applied AI to mental health contexts. The current study reports themes from staff member interviews conducted in the early phases of AI applied in a community mental health center (CMHC); these themes paint a picture of this CMHC “at its best” and will be fed-back to employees to lay the foundation for change and enhancing morale among staff. Interviews were conducted by 11 staff who volunteered from various departments and were trained by research staff at an all-day training. Appreciative Interviews first involved asking staff to describe a time they were at their best at this organization. Next, participants were asked to share what it was about themselves, others, and the setting that contributed to this experience. Additionally, interviewees were asked to “dream into the future” and to describe what they wish to see for this organization. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and de-identified. Iterative, consensus-based coding was conducted by a multidisciplinary team that included CMHC staff. Several consistent themes emerged among participants’ stories. Staff at their best frequently reported feeling effective and seeing success in working with consumers. Other themes included working as a team, communicating well, and trusting one another. Stories also involved feeling valued and supported by their supervisors and coworkers. A foundational aspect involved believing in and caring about consumers with whom they work. Themes from participants’ interviews reflect perceptions of this community mental health center at its best and are consistent with tenets self-determination theory and future study.

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